

Exodus 3:1-6; 19:1-6 (NRSV)

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 4:10-17 (NRSV)

¹⁰But Moses said to the LORD, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." ¹¹Then the LORD said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" ¹²Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." ¹³But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else." ¹⁴Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, "What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. ¹⁵You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. ¹⁶He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. ¹⁷Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."

Exodus 5:22-6:13 (NRSV)

²²Then Moses turned again to the LORD and said, "O LORD, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me?" ²³Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land."

²God also spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD. ³I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'The LORD' I did not make myself known to them. ⁴I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. ⁵I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. ⁶Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. ⁷I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. ⁸I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.' " ⁹Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to Moses, ¹¹"Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his land." ¹²But Moses spoke to the LORD, "The Israelites have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh listen to me, poor speaker that I am?" ¹³Thus the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, and gave them orders regarding the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, charging them to free the Israelites from the land of Egypt.

What do we know is true of God --- that God is patient.

This week, we begin a new series, *Knowing God*. I suppose there are lots of ways we could go about getting to know God better, but the best way is to begin with God's self-revelation in the pages of the Bible. There, we can not only learn what God has done, we can hear it from God's own lips, after a fashion. So, we are going to strive to know God better using the book of Exodus as our guide. There we will see God in action, and we will hear God's own description of his character. So, let's begin.

A burning bush?

Moses had grown up with mighty Pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt. But now he was tending a flock in the Sinai wilderness, after having fled Egypt. Moses knew that he was a Hebrew and when he had seen an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave, Moses had lost control and struck the slave-master, killing him. So Moses had fled across the Red Sea, settled into a new life, and had married. But the flock he tended wasn't even his own; the animals belonged to his father-in-law. Nonetheless, Moses looked after them as they walked in the shadow of mighty Mt. Horeb (also known as Mt. Sinai).

One day, Moses noticed a burning bush in the distance and went to check it out. As he approached the bush, he saw that even though flames licked upward, the bush wasn't being consumed by fire. Then he heard a voice calling out "Moses, Moses!" And so began Moses's education at the feet of God Almighty. Even from those first moments, it was clear that the god calling him was holy and that Moses was not. He was told to remove his sandals, for even the ground on which Moses stood was now holy ground. And as this god identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses hid his face in fear. Can a mortal, sinful man survive an encounter with the Holy One? Terence Fretheim, a very helpful Old Testament scholar, takes us a little deeper into Moses's encounter with the God he would come to know:

Moses hides his face, but certainly not for long. For the next few chapters, Moses and God engage in what can only be called a *face-to-face encounter* (cf. Num. 12:8), during which Moses is anything but deferential. God's word to Moses is of such a character that it draws the other into a genuine conversation. The exchange with God moves from worshipful deference to animated dialogue (see above). Divine holiness does not inhibit human response, even on the part of one who is "slow of speech" (4:10). Moreover, the word of the holy God now articulated (vv. 7–10) bespeaks, not distance and judgment, but closeness and concern. The *holy* God enters into the suffering of the people and makes it his own (3:7). As in Hos. 11:9 and Isa. 12:6, God is "the Holy One *in your midst*."

The emphasis throughout is on *the divine initiative*. It is God who confronts Moses and calls him to a task. Moses does not prepare for the encounter, nor does he seek it. He is surprised by what happens. . . . God's creative work in Moses' life to this point has shaped a human being with endowments suited for the tasks ahead. While the specific encounter with God brings new insights and a changed direction for life, an informed creation theology will affirm many continuities with Moses' past.

This ground is now holy because of God's appearance, not because it was already holy. There is no holiness inherent in the place as such, no natural sanctity, but that which is not holy now becomes so by virtue of the divine purpose for the place (not just the divine presence). That which is an ordinary part of the natural order is sanctified, set apart for special use by God. This setting apart was not only for this occasion but also for the future. God's appearance to Moses establishes Sinai/Horeb as a sacred place (cf. 3:12; Gen. 28:16–17). God draws a particular plot of ground, an aspect of the creative order, into a new sphere of relationship; nature too is affected by and serves as an instrument for the divine presence and purpose. Because of this change in the character of the place, Moses is asked to follow the custom of removing shoes to show respect (cf. Josh. 5:13–15).¹

God is so patient with Moses, who offers up reason after reason why he is not the man for the job. This encounter may be about the divine initiative, but Moses wants a way out. He wants to know exactly who it is that is sending him on this mission. So God reveals his name.² What if the people don't believe me? Moses asks. So, God gives

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 56–57.

² YHWH is the common English transliteration of the Hebrew name God reveals to Moses at the burning bush. This name was so sacred to the Jews that it came to be spoken only by the high priest, only in the

Moses the power to do miraculous signs. But I don't speak well, Moses reminds God. God assures Moses that God will be his mouth. Finally, Moses admits he just doesn't want to do this, "O my Lord, please send someone else." Understandably frustrated with Moses, God gives him Aaron, his brother, to speak for him. This is to be Moses' vocation and there is just no getting out of it. These are God's purposes and Moses is God's choice.

Take a look at Exodus 4:17 above. God is patient, but, nonetheless, God gets angry with Moses' endless excuses. In fact, even in this initial encounter at the burning bush, you wonder why God doesn't just move on. But this episode reveals a deeper truth about God. God's patience is born of God's love; his relentless pursuit of his people over the centuries demonstrates God's doggedly patient determination to rescue first the Israelites and then all the world from sin and darkness. Why such patience? Because God is love, plain and simple

When it doesn't go well

You've probably seen the movie. How does it go when Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh? Not well is an understatement. The Egyptian king scoffs, "Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go?" Fretheim notes that Pharaoh asks the right question, indeed, it is the question we are asking in this series:

Who is Yahweh? Ironically, Pharaoh gets the question right. This question will go ringing through the pages that follow. Pharaoh's (and the Egyptians') knowing is a divine goal (cf. 7:17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:2; 11:7; 14:4, 17), at least in part fulfilled in 9:27; 10:16; and 14:25. As we have seen (1:8), knowing has an effect on doing, and Pharaoh's not knowing Yahweh has disastrous results on God's creation. Even more, a goal of the narrator is the *readers'* knowing. The readers are invited, not to assume that the answer to Pharaoh's question is clear, but to build up an answer as they read and ponder and explore the nuances of the narrative. The very name of Yahweh, "I will be who I am," promises that the identity of this God of Israel will become more fully known as events unfold, both to Israel (10:2) and to Egypt.³

But all that is to come, for Pharaoh orders that the Israelite slaves now must make their bricks without using any straw supplied by the Egyptians; they will have to gather their own, making their task impossible. Not surprisingly, the Israelites turn on Moses and Aaron; so far, they have only made things worse. Again, not surprisingly, Moses then confronts God, "Why did you mistreat these people? Why did you send me? . . . You have done nothing at all!"

We might expect that God would respond in anger again, but he does not. Instead, God reassures Moses that God will lift his "mighty hand" and elaborates on what is to come. But it is too late for the Israelites, their spirits are broken. So God sends Moses and Aaron back to Pharaoh.

A patient God

God's patience with his people, with all humanity, is displayed across the entirety of Holy Scripture. We could dip into almost page and find God's patience on display. I chuckle to myself recalling Jesus' seemingly limitless patience with his own disciples. Talking about the Divine Patience is the perfect way to begin this series on Knowing God. In closing, here is a bit more on the virtue patience from Karen Swallow Prior that I used earlier this year:

temple, and only on one day each year, Yom Kippur. When Jews read their Scripture and came upon the name of God they would say *adonai* instead, the Hebrew word for "Lord." In keeping with the Hebrew tradition, our English translations substitute LORD (all small caps) in the Old Testament at each place YHWH appears. Thus, "the LORD God" in our Old Testaments is actually "YHWH God" in the Hebrew.

³ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 86.

N. T. Wright says that patience is required in order to attain the other virtues. “Patience is one of the places where faith, hope, and love meet up,” he writes. Augustine describes patience as the virtue by which “we tolerate evil things with an even mind.” The patient person, he continues, chooses to bear evil rather than to commit further evil in response to it. Patience keeps us from yielding to evils that are “temporal and brief” and from losing “those good things which are great and eternal.” Patience is a high virtue, that’s certain. No wonder patience is traditionally understood to be a subvirtue of courage. Indeed, all the virtues, Aquinas says, “are directed to the good of the soul.” He continues: “Now this seems to belong chiefly to patience; for it is written (Luke 21:19): ‘In your patience you shall possess your souls.’ Therefore patience is the greatest of the virtues.”⁴

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⁴ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.